Prehistory of Assam

Received 28 February 1990

DILIP KUMAR MEDHI

THE PREHISTORY OF ASSAM is still poorly represented in the larger knowledge of India. Neolithic tools, including ground stone "neoliths" and pottery, are found throughout Assam; inquiry into these artifacts began during the British regime. During the 1960s and 1970s, three important excavations were carried out, one in the North Cachar Hills (1961–1963) and two in the district of Kamrup (1972–1974). These excavations authenticated the neolithic assignments of ground stone tools and pottery. Older extant resources for the study of the Assam Neolithic include artifacts collected by British military and administrative officers and now held in the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Oxford Museum and, in India, the Assam State Museum. The journals of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Assam Research Society have published a variety of accounts of neolithic archaeological materials.

A coherent inquiry into the prehistory of Assam faces a problem, in spite of the wealth of information available. The territory has been in recent political turmoil, and we must define the range of our areal interests. The original state of Assam now includes Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh (formerly NEFA), and Meghalaya; now they, and Tripura, are known as Northeast India (Fig. 1). In understanding identities, one cannot ignore each region's special geographical and cultural characteristics. Prehistoric cultural diversity throughout Assam is to be expected and sought archaeologically.

Archaeologists undertaking new research face a variety of problems, both political and environmental. Natural hazards include frequent flooding by the rivers that abound locally, by the processes of siltation associated with flooding, and by related human-induced erosion. The plains are the most troublesome, yet the hills have their own problems. Swidden cultivators have for years had an impact on archaeological sites, by the chance excavation of ground celts, which are then used as "thunder stones" in religious rites.

This article, then, is a survey of research into the prehistory of the neighboring states of the Assam region. I will also consider the prehistory of the entire region.

Dilip K. Medhi is a Reader in the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh 786004 (Assam), India. Currently he is working on the prehistoric pottery of Southeast Asia in the Department of Anthropology, University of Hawaii, Honolulu.

Asian Perspectives, Vol. 29, no. 1.

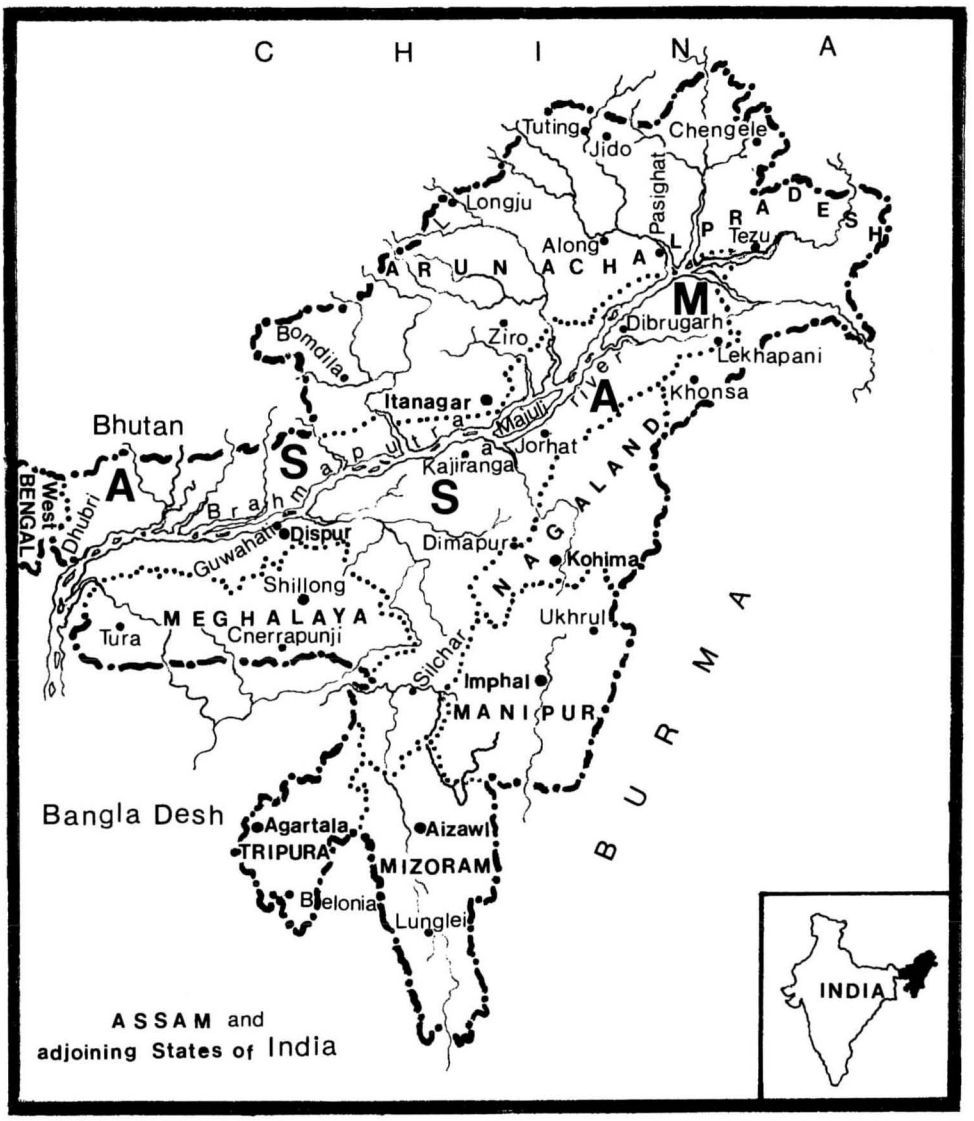

Fig. 1. Assam and adjoining states of India.

MEGHALAYA

The erstwhile district of Garo Hills has long been known to yield ground stone tools. Since its inception in 1948 the Department of Anthropology of Gauhati University has been conducting investigations into the region's prehistory. The archaeological pioneer is M. C. Goswami, who was initially joined by A. C. Bhagabati (1959). Later scholars include T. C. Sharma, H. C. Sharma S. K. Roy and myself, who have joined Goswami in carrying out a number of studies in connection with postgraduate dissertation projects; we collected extensively, retrieving stone

tools now housed in the Department of Anthropology of Gauhati University. In 1969 H. D. Sankalia visited the Garo Hills and observed that palaeolithic tools were likely present. Since that time, Gauhati University has aimed to recover such palaeoliths (preneolithic tools) and assemblages. In 1972 H. C. Sharma completed his Ph.D. dissertation on the palaeoliths of the Garo Hills. His supervisor, T. C. Sharma, was always committed to verification of the palaeolithic assignment of the Garo Hills materials (T. C. Sharma 1986). At the same time, Asok Ghosh of Calcutta University argued that the palaeoliths of the region were in fact neolithic stone debitage (Ghosh 1977).

In 1975 I began my Ph.D. research from Deccan College, Pune, on the palaeoenvironment of the Garo Hills, placing it in the context of the known prehistory. Working under the supervision of S. N. Rajaguru, I observed that the palaeoliths in question are found to occur in the subrecent terraces as well as on the weathered rock surfaces, both of which are geochronologically dated to late quaternary times, i.e., to the Holocene (Medhi 1980). Sharma and Sharma collected handaxes and other cutting-edge tools improperly designated as cleavers. It is important to note that these tools were found in association with both ground and chipped neolithic celts.

Between 1982 and 1984, I undertook a study of the lithic chronology of the Garo Hills. Excavations were carried out in the region, with reports submitted to the University Grants Commission in New Delhi. We concluded that the tools in the area are not found in a stratified context and that ground and chipped tools are found together, confirming the earlier observations. We further conclude, however, that the chipped stone is not simply debitage, as advanced by Ghosh, but purposefully knapped artifacts, at least in part. The use of the chipped stone tools remains problematic, since weathering has eradicated secondary chipping and wear-use evidence. Further excavations, with the recovery of artifacts from minimally weathered contexts, should allow resolution of the problem of explaining the nature of Garo Hills chipped stone tools. I myself strongly argue for an established neolithic presence.

Some evidence of the viability of a neolithic life-style is found in the existence of present-day tribal economies reminiscent of neolithic cultures. The Garos (Medhi 1983, 1988; Roy 1981) exemplified the several hill tribes that ethnoarchaeologists may draw upon for an understanding of the neolithic economy and for verification that the environment supports such adaptations. The neolithic system that penetrated India through Assam (Worman 1949) from Southeast Asia proper seems to have flourished in this part of Meghalaya. Before the appearance of agriculture, this region was likely devoid of humans, due to the impenetrable "Malda Gap," which deterred the immigration of palaeolithic people from the Chotanagpur Plateau, or the mainland of India.

Several sites remain to be excavated in Meghalaya; the important neolithic factory site on the bank of Barapani Lake is especially promising concerning human activities in the early Holocene. And from the Khasi Hills, H. H. Godwyn Austen (1875) collected a celt and J. Cockburn (1879) a pair of polished axes.

TRIPURA

Recently the quaternary deposits of Tripura have yielded stone tools. The expeditions of the Geological Survey of India (Poddar and Ramesh 1983) report toolkits comprising scapers, points, chopping tools, hammer stones, blades, and cores from

which blade scars, or flutes, are evident. The assemblage has not been radio carbon dated, although dates for other layers have been determined. We expect a neolithic assignment, since the artifacts include ground and polished stone tools and ceramics in the form of sherds.

MANIPUR

O. K. Singh (1972, 1983) has discovered and reported interesting stone tool and bone assemblages. Limestone caves at Ukhrul have proven rich in tools. Singh excavated cave 7, which contained handaxes and cleavers in its lower level and scrapers, points, borers, blades, burins, and bone points in the upper level. Singh has also discovered a small pebble chopper, in layer VI at Napachik, near the village Wangu on the bank of the Turel Achouba River. Layer VI is overlain by a neolithic deposit, suggesting a preneolithic date for the pebble chopper. Another chopper, a fine specimen made from quartzite, was collected from Machi in Tengnoupal District and is now housed in the Manipur State Museum.

Neolithic tools in Manipur are known from surface and museum collections, and consist of triangular axes, faceted quadrangular axes, adzes, shouldered celts, and chisels made of basalt, shale, schist, and quartzite (Singh and Sharma 1969). Basic geoarchaeology in Manipur has been carried out by T. Angou Singh of the Department of Archaeology, Deccan College, Pune.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Bopardikar (1972) reported a number of stone tools from Daphabum in Lohit District. The assemblage includes choppers, protohandaxes, ovates, cleavers, and a variety of scrapers and cores. There is some question about the authenticity of these tools, but they seem relevant to the prehistory of Arunachal Pradesh. Bopardikar has also collected a few ground splayed axes, triangular axes, shoulder celts, and chisels.

In 1933–1935 P. P. Mills and J. H. Grace collected 17 neolithic implements, including faceted and round butt axes from the area Dani (1960) has termed the "Sadiya Frontier Zone." J. Anderson, working in the same area in 1871, amassed a noteworthy collection of neolithic implements. Goswami and his colleagues (1972) reported 18 neolithic tools that had been secured by R. C. Das, presently assistant curator of the Assam State Museum. The tools originated in Kameng District and were made from jadeite, dolerite, gneiss, schist, and bone. In recent years, Abdulla Ashraf Ali of the Department of Research, Arunachal Pradesh, is reported to have excavated a number of stone tools and potsherds.

MIZORAM AND NAGALAND

Little is known of the prehistory of Mizoram. A thin slate axe and two small jadeite tools have been reported (Sankalia 1974).

Dani (1960) advances the idea that 12 specimens of neolithic jadeite artifacts are imports from either Burma or China. He argues that the raw material is not available locally. Little else is known of Nagaland.

ASSAM

Having discussed local prehistories, I will now turn to the prehistory of Assam. Assam prehistory is primarily based on finds of celts and potsherds, all found scattered throughout the region. Collecting began in the mid-nineteenth century, about 1850. The major contributions to Assam prehistory are those of A. H. Dani (1960) and T. C. Sharma (1966). Dani, with his Ph.D. project, was the pioneer in the region. His dissertation incorporated all that was known of the Assam Neolithic. Sharma's research, also related to a Ph.D. degree, included new data and the information from the Daojali Hading excavations.

Going back to the previous century, we find the early work of W. Haly, a British tea planter who acquired a blue jadeite celt from a Namsang Naga and who later donated it to a Lt. E. H. Steel. This find was first reported by Sir John Lubbock (1867). Three more jadeite axes were collected by Steel (1870) and another two by Lt. Baron (1872). Anderson (1871) collected a huge toolkit of neolithic implements from the Mishmi Hills of the Sadiya region (now in Arunachal Pradesh). S. E. Peal (1896) discovered a celt in a tea garden in upper Assam. Medlicot (1875) mentions a stone hatchet (an elongated axe) from Dibrugarh. In the beginning of the present century W. Penny discovered a hoard of neolithic tools in a stratified context while digging a ditch at Biswanath in Darrang District; these were later catalogued by Coggin Brown in 1917. The Assam State Museum acquired 33 pieces from Mills and Pawsey, although only 27 are extant (Pakrasi 1956).

The arrival of Sir J. P. Mills and J. H. Hutton brought new vigor to research on the neolithic period in Assam. These two British officers, along with J. D. Walker, J. H. Grace, and C. R. Pawsey, after investigations (Mills and Hutton 1929), deposited 385 neolithic artifacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. Dani later studied the artifacts, observing a regional identity and aspects of variation (Dani 1960). In 1939 K. L. Barua was the first Assamese scholar to prepare a comprehensive regional synthesis and to compare celts found in the old Darrang District and the Cachar District with adzes found in Burma and Chotanagpur. P. C. Choudhury (1944), another local scholar, studied the general outlines of Assam prehistoric cultures.

Research was discontinued during World War II, resuming in the late 1950s at Gauhati University. The first excavation at Daojali Hading in the North Cachar Hills was carried out by M. C. Goswami and T. C. Sharma. Working from 1961 to 1963, they investigated a single cultural layer some 45 cm thick, retrieving axes, adzes, hoes, chisels, grinding slabs, flat and concave querns, mulls, and pestles, as well as pottery. The pottery was not wheel thrown, and ranged from gray to dull red in color. Decoration was by cord marking; in addition, a minor type of dull red stamped ware was found. The tools were made of indurated shale, sandstone, and fossil wood. They are flaked over all their surfaces, with ground cutting edges. The common types were shouldered celts, quadrangular axes, and adzes with rectangular cross sections. The presence of large numbers of grinding slabs suggests that the area was a factory site (Goswami and Sharma 1963). T. C. Sharma (1966) reports his analyses of Hutton's and Mills's artifacts in the Pitt Rivers Museum.

In 1973 S. N. Rao and D. K. Dutta of Dibrugarh University completed an outstanding excavation at Sarutaru, about 25 km southeast of Guwahati. The site contained a single cultural layer about 35 cm thick. Nine celts of slate were found.

Handmade cord-impressed pottery was found with the stone tools, including a complete ceramic vessel. Charcoal found is inferred to have resulted from slash and burn swiddening activities.

Marakdola, a site only about 1 km from Sarutaru, again had one cultural layer and revealed a shouldered celt, a terra-cotta object, and wheel-made kaolin pottery of historic date. This anomaly at Marakdola is explained by Rao as the result of contact, perhaps symbiosis, between a neolithic settlement and a more advanced society.

Ambari, an important historic site situated in the heart of Guwahati City, also yielded kaolin pottery, leading Rao (1973, 1977) to assign Marakdola and Ambari to a date around the beginning of the Christian era. The assignment is supported by radiocarbon dates.

After careful examination of the excavated finds of Daojali Hading and Sarutaru, especially the cord-marked pottery and the neolithic tools, close affinities to those found in Southeast Asia are apparent. Further research into the pottery and lithic assemblages aimed at understanding connections with Burma and Thailand should show a great antiquity of general cultural sharing and communication within this culture area. Assam may be hypothesized to share in the development of the Southeast Asian Neolithic—a sharing still apparent in the Southeast Asian nature of the ethnic communities of the region.

In this review of Assam prehistory the artifactual remains have been discussed. Stone celts, axes, and adzes dominate, along with earthenware potsherds. We have, however, little understanding of the prehistoric economies and societies that used the technologies of stone and ceramics. Nor are absolute dates adequate. We may, however, draw further on observations of the ethnographic situation. The potential for ethnoarchaeological research will be evident.

In Assam and adjoining states of India, an agrarian life-style is still widespread and available for study. Among the hill societies, as with some riverine people, hunting, fishing, and agricultural practices all can inform us as to neolithic possibilities. Collection of roots, fruits, and flowers points to prehistoric patterns. In the hills, the slash and burn system is still the preferred practice.

Slash and burn, or *jhum* cultivation, still retains various qualities of past neolithic traits. In the Garo Hills where *jhum* cultivation is common and neolithic celts are often found, the blade of the hoe presently used to till the soil is similar in shape and size to the ground stone celt (Roy 1981: Fig. 1, 4). Late neolithic and more recent prehistoric cultures might profit from ethnoarchaeological investigations of still extant tribes in Assam that are actively engaged in megalithic cultural practices. A comparative study of the archaeological and ethnographic material cultures of Assam and Southeast Asia to the east, through Burma and as far as Viet Nam may reveal the cultural proximity of Assam and its eastern neighbors, a proximity extending well back into the ancient Neolithic. I strongly believe that present-day Northeast India was in the past much closer to the rest of Mainland Southeast Asia. Archaeology, ethnography, and geography support this idea. Future research will thoroughly test its validity.

REFERENCES

ANDERSON, JOHN
1871 The stone implements of Yunnan with a notice of a bronze axe-like weapon from the Sunda valley, in *Report on the Expedition to Western Yunnan via BHAMO*: 410–415. Calcutta.

BARON, LT.
1872 Note on stone implements from the Naga Hills. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, London* 1:61–62.

BARUA, K. L.
1939 Prehistoric culture of Assam. *JARS* 7(1–2):35–41.
1965 *Early History of Kamarupa*. Guwahati: Kampura Anusandhana Samiti.

BHUYAN, GUNINDRA NATH
1988 Archaeology in northeast India. Unpublished paper, Directorate of Archaeology, Assam, Guwahati.

BOPARDIKAR, B. P.
1972 Prehistoric investigations—Daphabum Scientific Survey Expedition (NEFA), in *Archaeological Congress and Seminal Papers, Nagpur University:* 1–8. Nagpur: Nagpur University.

BROWN, COGGIN
1917 *Catalogue Raisonné of the Prehistoric Antiquities in the Indian Museum, Calcutta*. Simla: Central Government Press.

CHOUDHURY, P. C.
1944 Neolithic culture in Kamarupa. *JARS* 11:41–47.

COCKBURN, JOHN
1879 Stone implements from the Khasi Hills. *JASB*, Part I(48):133–137.

DANI, A. H.
1960 *Prehistory and Protohistory of Eastern India*. Calcutta.

DASGUPTA, H. C.
1913 On two shouldered stone implements from Assam. *JASB* 9:291–293.

GHOSH, A. K.
1977 What happens when cultural and biological adaptability of man fails? A case study with Palaeolithic period in the Garo Hills, in *Cultural and Biological Adaptability of Man with Special Reference to Northeast India*. Dibrugarh: Dibrugarh University.

GODWYN AUSTEN, H. H.
1875 A celt found in the Khasi Hills at Shillong. *JASB*: 158–159.

GOSWAMI, M. C., AND A. C. BHAGABATI
1959 A typological study of shouldered celt from Rengchangiri (Garo Hills). *JUG* 10(2):105–122.

GOSWAMI, M. C., AND T. C. SHARMA
1963 Further report on the investigations into the prehistoric archaeology of North Cachar Hills, Assam. *JUG* 14(2):45–47.

GOSWAMI, M. C., H. C. SHARMA, AND R. C. DAS
1972 A typological study of some prehistoric tools from the Kameng district of NEFA (Arunachal). *JASS* 15(1):129–135.

HUTTON, J. H.
1924 Two celts from the Naga Hills. *Man* 24(15):20–22.
1926 A Naga Hill celt. *JASB* 22:133.
1928 Prehistory of Assam. *Man in India* 8(4):228–232.

LUBBOCK, SIR JOHN
1867 The Stone Age: Stone tools in upper Assam. *Athenaeum* 2069:822.

MEDHI, DILIP KUMAR
1980 Quaternary history of the Garo Hills, Meghalaya. Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Poona University, Pune.
1983 The Garo and their material culture: A study based on ethnoarchaeological approach. *Man and Environment* 7:70–77.
1988 Palaeolithic remains from the Garo Hills, Meghalaya, in *History and Archaeology (Professor H. D. Sankalia Felicitation Volume):* 346–350. Delhi: Ramanand and Vidya Bhawan.

MEDLICOT, HENRY BENEDICT
1875 A short hatchet from Dibrugarh, upper Assam. *PASB*, 159.

MILLS, J. P.
1933 Assam as a field of research. *JARS* 1(1):3–6.

MILLS, J. P., AND J. H. HUTTON
1929 Ancient monoliths of North Cachar. *JASB* 25:295–296.

PAKRASI, K.
1956 A study of some neolithic artifacts from Assam. *JUG* 7:1.

PEAL, S. E.
1872 On a model illustrating the Naga method of climbing large trees, and a celt. *PASB*, August, 1872:135–138. Calcutta 16: 1 Park Street.
1896 On some traces of Kol-Mon-Anam in the Eastern Naga Hills. *JASB* 65(3):20–24. Calcutta 16: 1 Park Street.

PODDAR, B. C., AND N. R. RAMESH
1983 Spotlight on prehistory of Tripura. *G.S.I. (NER) News Letter* 2(1):1–4.

RAO, S. N.
1973 The neolithic culture of Sarutaru. *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, Dibrugarh University* 2:1–9.
1977 Excavations at Sarutaru: A neolithic site in Assam. *Man and Environment* 1:39–43. Ahmedabad: Indian Society for Prehistoric and Quaternary Studies.

ROY, SAUKAR KUMAR
1981 Aspects of neolithic agriculture and shifting cultivation, Garo Hills, Meghalaya. *AP* 24(2):193–221.

SANKALIA, H. D.
1974 *Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan*. Rev. ed. Pune: Deccan College.

SHARMA, H. C.
1972 Stone Age cultures of Garo Hills. Unpublished Ph.D. diss., Gauhati University.

SHARMA, T. C.
1966 Prehistoric archaeology of Assam: A study of neolithic culture. Unpublished Ph.D. diss., London University.
1986 Recent advances in prehistory and archaeology of northeast India. *JARS* 28:1–28.

SINGH, O. K.
1972 *Antiquities of Manipur*. Bulletin. No. 1 of Manipur State Museum.
1983 *Archaeology in Manipur* (Series 1): 7–23. State Archaeology, Manipur, Imphal.

SINGH, O. K., AND T. C. SHARMA
1969 On the discovery of Stone Age relics from Manipur. *JASS* 12:36–48.

STEEL, E. H.
1870 On the Assam Jade celt. *PASB*, September, 1870:267–268. Calcutta 16: 1 Park Street.

WORMAN, EUGENE C., JR.
1949 The "neolithic" problem in prehistory of India. *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 39(6):181–201.